TOPLINE MESSAGES: Bristol Bay Draft Assessment

- EPA's draft Bristol Bay watershed assessment – which responds to requests for EPA action by several regional, native and national groups concerned about potential threats to the watershed– assesses the benefits provided by the watershed and the potential impacts mining activity may have on this unique and sensitive ecosystem.
- This is a scientific document – it is not a regulatory determination. EPA has made no decision about whether and in what manner to use its authorities under the Clean Water Act or other laws.
- The assessment will inform future decisions on large-scale mining in Bristol Bay, including the review of any individual permit applications that are submitted and other actions consistent with EPA's authority under the Clean Water Act.
- The draft assessment, which focuses on the Nushagak and Kvichak River watersheds of Bristol Bay, makes clear that the Bay is a unique and unparalleled natural resource –home to the largest undisturbed wild salmon run in the world.
- Almost half of the world's sockeye salmon is produced within Bristol Bay, with the Nushagak and Kvichak River watersheds responsible for half of this production. The Nushagak River alone is the fourth largest producer of Chinook salmon in North America. All five species of North American Pacific salmon are produced in Bristol Bay.
- This valuable natural resource is an economic driver for the state of Alaska and the country – commercial fishing in the watershed supports 14,000 full or part-time jobs and up to $480 million in revenue each year.
- The Bristol Bay Watershed is also a world-class destination for sportsmen and women - supporting a thriving, $60 million a year sport-fishing industry and more than 800 full or part-time jobs.
- In addition, for four thousand years the watershed and its unique salmon resources have supported a subsistence lifestyle for thousands of Alaska native villagers.
- Given these factors, EPA's draft assessment makes clear a high bar needs to be met before large-scale projects with the potential to disrupt this unique, sensitive and economically vital ecosystem should go forward.
- While drawing on available information about proposed mining projects such as the Pebble Mine, the focus of the assessment is on the characteristics likely associated with any large-scale mining project in the watershed and the resulting environmental footprint – including:
    - The potential loss of habitat used for salmon spawning
    - The creation of large volumes of mining waste and the need to store that waste in a tailing pond or other structure in perpetuity;
    - The creation of large waste rock piles and the diversion of large amounts of water to process ore and contain contaminated tailings;
    - The potential release of acidic waters, metals and other toxicants to groundwater and surface water; and,
    - the need for extensive infrastructure to support mining in this remote area, including roads, multiple pipelines and a power plant.

- EPA's assessment looks at potential impacts associated with large-scale mining –both assuming the normal operation of the mine and assuming potential failures in parts of the mining operations historically associated with mining activity.

- The assessment concludes that, as one would expect when there are significant changes in a sensitive ecosystem, there is potential for large-scale mining to have adverse impacts on the productivity and sustainability of the salmon fishery in the watershed and, therefore, that there should be a very high bar met before such projects go forward
- In the course of the assessment, EPA also considered a number of mining prospects being explored in the part of the watershed covered by the assessment, with seven of them in advanced stages of exploration.
- It is important to note that this is the beginning of the process, not the end – we have worked to compile the best available science on the draft Bristol Bay Watershed and we are now making it available for public comment. We are seeking input from a range of stakeholders and experts and will hold public meetings in the area to ensure as many people as possible have a chance to make their voices heard.
- Finally, the draft watershed assessment will also be subject to rigorous peer review to ensure the science is comprehensive and accurate.